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FAMILIES OF CIVIL ADMINISTRATORS IN SAFAVID IRAN

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Long-term career strategies of the Khʷājas of Barnābād (Khorasan, *ca*. 15th-18th c.)* [*DYNTRAN Working Paper*, no. 30, November 2017]

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Under the Safavid dynasty in Iran (1501-1722 or 1736 CE) provincial administration was frequently entrusted into the hands of local, influential families that were firmly and securely established in their regions of origin. However, in general, their history still not only remains poorly known, but especially as it relates to a larger picture of social history of the Muslim and Persianate worlds. In this paper, I will sketch some lines of history of a particular family, especially in respect to strategies employed for securing status, wealth and influence through the control of several key economic and professional activities.

In the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, the large province of Khorasan played a predominant role from many points of view: the political and dynastic as well as cultural and economic. Situated on the Central Asian and Indian border of the Safavid state, the province sheltered Herat, the world-renowned capital of the Timurids (1405-1507), and Mashhad (*Mashhad-e Ṭus*), a main pilgrimage site with the grave of the 8th Shiite Imām, ʿAli Reżā (d. 818).

After the fall of the Timurids in Central Asia (*ca*. 1500) and in eastern Iran (1507), the control of the Khorasan province became an object of dispute between the Safavids and the Uzbek regimes from Central Asia; as a result, the province suffered a string of military campaigns throughout the sixteenth century. Considered one of the key provinces in the state, Khorasan was traditionally ruled by a Safavid royal prince under the supervision of a court appointed military governor. The seminal study by Dickson (1958), devoted to the Safavid-Uzbek confrontation for Khorasan in the sixteenth century, gave a particular impulse for later research on Timurid, Uzbek and Safavid political traditions and mechanisms of formation of political loyalties, networks of partisan groups, and transmission of political and spiritual heritages. To quote one example: the family/spiritual lineage known in contemporary sources as the "Khʷājas of Ziyāratgāh" (in reference to their village of origin, *ca*. 20 km south of Herat) apparently played a prominent role in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, until at least *ca*. 1535-37 (when they headed an anti-Safavid revolt); however, they remain understudied, mostly due to scarcity of systematic source material. Some glimpses of their history are to be found in Khʷāndamir's *Ḥabib al-siyar* and in Amir Maḥmud's *Tārikh-e Shāh Esmāʿil-e avval va Shāh Ṭahmāsp* (see the bibliographic references, below, for the editions of these sources; also cf. Szuppe 1992: 105-109, 151-155, and *passim*). While architectural and archaeological remains of mosques, madrasas and *khānaqāh*s of Ziyāratgāh have been documented and described (for example, O'Kane 1987: cat. n°49; Golombek & Wilber 1988, I, n°123, n°124), they nevertheless remain understudied in historical context.

The Khʷājas of Barnābād

However, there are also other Khorasani local families that have recently been brought to light drawing on an interesting source material. My research has been focusing on one such family originating from Barnābād (sometimes spelled Barānābād), a village situated about 13 km to the north-east of Guriyān, west of Herat, in present-day Afghanistan. Unknown prior to the mid-fifteenth century, the Barnābādis were later considered a "saintly" family of Sufis, titled *khʷāja* or Master, and many of whom held offices in the local Khorasan administration of different ranks and were sometimes also referred to as *mirzā* (title used for officers of higher civil administration during Safavid times). Characteristically for this social group, some members of different lineages gained local renown as poets and calligraphers, of which Moḥammad Arshād (1616-1703) who wrote under the penname of "Māyel" is an emblematic figure.

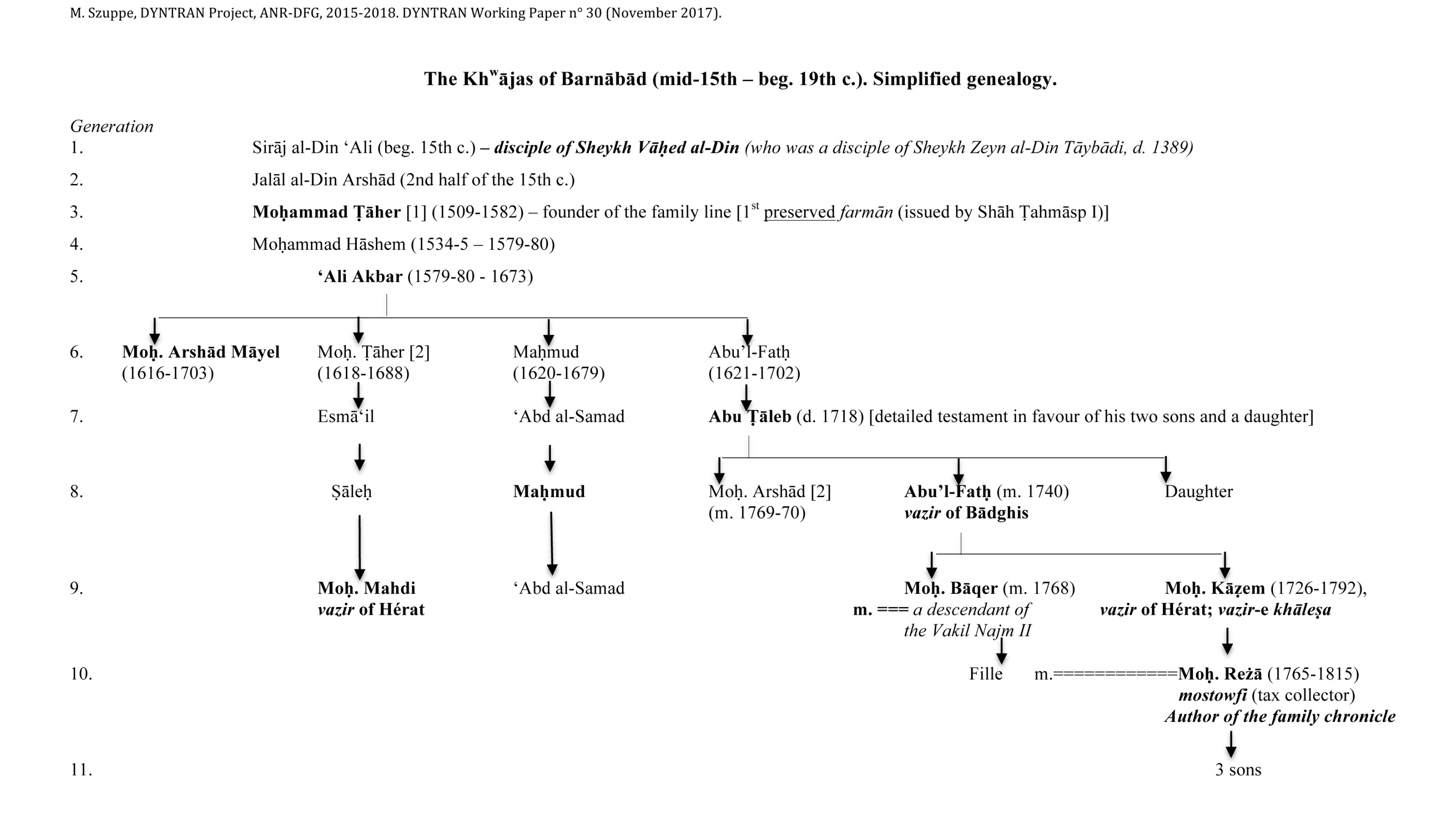


Table 1. Simplified genealogy of the Barnābādi Khwājas, based on the Taẕkera-ye Barnābādi (ed. Tumanovich 1984).

The Barnābādis emerged out of historical obscurity thanks to research conducted by Najib Māyel-e Heravi (1969) and Natalia N. Tumanovich (1984, 1989), based on a family chronicle *cum* hagiography, *Taẕkera-ye Barnābādi* (or *Yād-dāshtahā-ye Barnābādi*), written by an eminent member of the family in the early nineteenth century. Interestingly, some European nineteenth- and twentieth-century reports mention Barnābād as a major pilgrimage site (*ziyāratgāh*) in the area and note the presence of a lineage of Pirs (Sufi Masters) whose local influence remained considerable (*cf*. Artamonov 1895; Chaffetz 1981; Sierakowska-Dyndo 2007; Crews 2015). The question as to ascertain their religious and Sufi obedience

—Sunni, Shi’a, Naqshbandi…—is an intricate one and much linked to changing historical context over centuries.

The Barnābādis and their “family history”

Thus, a particular source enables us to follow each member of the Barnābādi family over several generations, from the mid-fifteenth century to the year 1806 (or 1811), when the *Taẕkera-ye Barnābādi* was written by Khʷāja Moḥammad Reżā Barnābādi (d. 1815), i.e. about 350 years and some ten generations, which really is quite exceptional. The author states that he composed his work in order to “preserve the memory of the family from oblivion”, and that he ordered nine copies of his work to be made and dispatched them among his true friends and family members for safe keeping; at the time of writing, the long influent family underwent a change of fortune and was subject to vexations and persecutions from their rivals at the court in Herat (*Taẕkera-ye Barnābādi*). Of these “nine manuscripts”, three copies have been reported as extant in modern times. The one in the Library of the Institute of Oriental manuscripts in Saint-Petersburg (ms. C 402) was published in facsimile by Tumanovich (1984). Another one was analysed by Māyel-e Heravi and published as a study under the title of *Mirzāyān-e Barnābād* (1969); this copy was kept at the time in the Institute of History in Kabul. The third copy was reported by Māyel-e Heravi as in a private collection in Afghanistan.

Who were the Barnābādis?

The *Taẕkera-ye Barnābādi* makes it clear that the Khʷājas were hereditary guardians (*motavallis*) of a shrine dedicated to a person named Pir Vāḥed al-Din (d. early 15th c.), a saintly figure linked to the Naqshbandi Sufi order and, in some way to the Sheykhs of Jām, through the person of the famous Sheykh Zeyn al-Din Tāybādi (d. 1389) who was reputedly the spiritual master of Pir Vāḥed al-Din.



Fig. 1. View of the khānaqāh of Pir Vāḥed al-Din at Barnābād (end 15th c./beg. 16th c.) in the 1970s (© Courtesy of Bernard O'Kane, own collection).

In the mid-sixteenth century, the then head of the family, Khʷāja Moḥammad Ṭāher Barnābādi (1509-1582), entered the service of the Safavid governors of Herat, and received a royal *farmān* from the ruling Shāh Ṭahmāsp I (r. 1524-1586). His successor and grandson Khʷāja ʻAli-Akbar (1580-1673) followed in his steps, as well as one of ʻAli-Akbar's sons, Khʷāja Abu Ṭāleb (d. 1718) and the descendants of the latter. They were all granted different offices and charges in the Safavid administration of Herat and of the Khurasan province, especially in Bādghis. The Barnābādis were especially granted offices in the chancellery, and in the financial administration: they were viziers of Herat, but also of the Bādghis district, as well as tax collectors (*mostowfi*s) of different ranks [see Table 1]. Their position was high enough to enable politically important marriage alliances, such as the union of Khʷāja Moḥammad Bāqer (d. 1768) with a lady descending from the celebrated *vakil* (Vice-Regent) of the first Safavid ruler Shāh Esmāʻil (r. 1501-1524), Mir Yār-Aḥmad Khuzāni known as The Second Star (*Najm-e Thāni*). Their good fortune continued for a good while, and at the end of the eighteenth century, under the Afghan rulers who replaced the Safavids in Herat, Khʷāja Moḥammad Kāzem Barnābādi (1726-1792) became the head of the royal Chancellery (*vazir-e khāleṣa*).

Diversification of activities

The *Taẕkera-ye Barnābādi* shows that in the sixteenth and seventeenth century the Barnābādi family was quite diversified and divided in several branches. Importantly, one of their branches was systematically residing in Barnābād, for the control of Pir Vāḥed al-Din's shrine; the adjoining cemetery shelters many graves of family members, including women. By the early nineteenth century, the family was reputedly immensely rich, not only owning land, mills, or shops, but also a library of books, for example (*cf*. *Taẕkera-ye Barnābādi*); consequently, they could easily invest part of their revenues into cultural and literary activities, and patronage of their home village as well as other localities in the area.

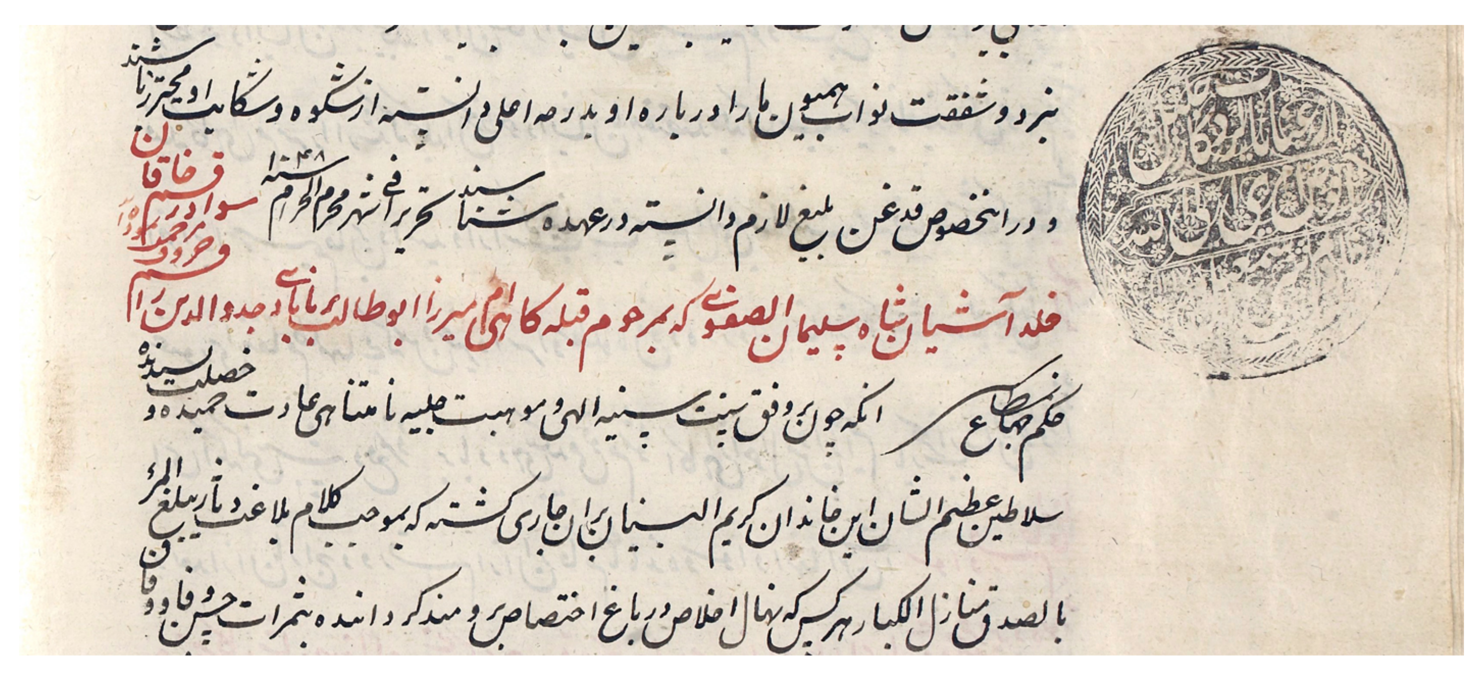


Fig. 2. Opening lines of a farmān issued by Shāh Soleymân Safavi (1666-1694) in favour of Abu Ṭāleb Barnābādi. Detail of Ms C 402, f. 26b, Taẕkera-ye Barnābādi (© Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, St-Petersburg).

The copies of family documents inserted in the text of the *Taẕkera-ye Barnābādi* (such as the *farmān* of Shāh Ṭahmāsp mentioned above, and others, *passim*) illustrate not only the stages in the rise of the family within the administrative hierarchy, but they also show the expansion of land property and in general of the family wealth (*cf*. Tumanovich 1984, for the translation of some of these documents into Russian). Barnābād being favourably situated close to the borough of Ghuriyān and just off the main road linking eastern and western Khorasan, i.e. Herat with Jām and Mashhad, their income was not only that of state salary and regular trade, but primarily generated by the pilgrimage activities around the Pir Vāḥed al-Din's shrine, its mosque, its madrasa, and the cemetery. Indeed, the remains of the mosque and *khānāqah* built in Barnābād around the end of the fifteenth century or the beginning of the sixteenth have been documented in several publications (*cf*. Māyel-e Heravi 1969; Samizay 1981: 38-41; Golombek & Wilber 1988, I: cat. n° 67); its stylistic similarity with buildings in Ghuriyān and Ziyārtagāh, as well as in Tāybād, for example, has been noticed (Golombek & Wilber 1988, I: cat. n°67).



Map. Khorasan and its surroundings, showing the location of Barnābād in the Herat valley (©Dyntran, 2015-2018. By E. Giraudet)

Professional diversification is not an uncommon feature in the Persianate world, and it can be observed among other Sufi families of the early modern period, including the Safavids themselves. For example, one Safavid line—that of Sheykh Ṣafi al-Din Ardabili (d. 1334)—was involved in Sufi activities while other branches of the family occupied themselves with long-distance trade, and large-scale agricultural activities (*cf*. Aubin 1991).

Thus, the Barnābādis were progressively able to secure several simultaneous sources of income: state salary (administrative offices), land and other estate revenue (situated in and around Barnābād, in Herat and in the Herat province), and profits generated by the pilgrimage economy and the management of the Barnābād shrine. They accumulated certain political and economic influence with a form of religious prestige, as is clearly indicated by their honorific title of Khʷāja usually applied in Central Asian and Eastern Iranian context to lines of spiritual Masters.

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